

EÖTVÖS LORÁND UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Social Sciences

Doctoral School of Sociology

Social Policy Programme

2018



THESIS SUMMARY

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**Analysis of access and participation of students with
disabilities in higher education**

Summary of PhD thesis

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Background of the doctoral dissertation

The doctoral dissertation "*Analysis of access and participation in higher education for people with disabilities*" is part of a long-term research program.

The long-term program aims to accumulate new knowledge by examining access and participation of students with disabilities in higher education in Hungary. The research is based on the relevant national and international literature and legislation review and empirical data collection.

The relevance of the topic

Among the broad goals of the European Union are to strengthen social cohesion, including fostering access and participation of people with disabilities in higher education. Promoting social participation of people with disabilities is not a peripheral problem, as roughly there are approximately 80 million people with disabilities, which are about 16% of the population of the European Union (EDF. 2017; Fazekas, 2017). Over the past two decades, in education and training policy questions of social inclusion (Social Dimensions of Education Policy (Social Inclusion) of under-represented groups (including people with disabilities) have become increasingly important both abroad and in Hungary. There have been many studies published lately, and many project initiatives have been taken place to enhance access and participation of people with disabilities both in Hungary and abroad.

The subject of the doctoral dissertation

Nowadays theoretical questions in the field of disability studies are prevalent, and there is a wide range of literature. Disability studies have grown into an independent, multidisciplinary field. Within the broad scope of disability studies, the doctoral dissertation (in line with the title of the dissertation) addresses issues of access and participation of persons with disabilities in higher education.

Research questions

The doctoral dissertation investigates various barriers to access and participation in higher education for persons with disabilities. Different types of barriers may make access to higher education difficult or impossible for people with disabilities. Such as:

- (1) physical barriers;
- (2) legal barriers;
- (3) barriers in the teaching and learning environment (barriers in teaching methodology, and techniques);
- (4) different forms of attitudinal barriers

The first group consists of barriers to the built environment and barriers of means of transport which have an impact on the person with an impairment (such as physical impairment). In a built environment, for example, a stair may constitute a barrier for a person who uses a wheelchair.

However, this dissertation does not aim to address barriers to the built environment and transport facilities and vehicles which have an impact on persons with disabilities.

The second category includes legislative barriers. In some respect, these may restrict access to higher education for persons with disabilities. Requiring different medical/health, fitness to practice examinations for specific study fields may result in narrowing access to higher education.

The dissertation does investigate issues related to the medical/health, fitness to practice examinations in access to higher education.

The third group of barriers are commonly referred to as “barriers in teaching and learning environment”, (such as barriers to teaching methodology and techniques). These barriers are related to teaching, access to curricula and the acquisition of knowledge which make difficult or impossible to complete and to meet the study requirements for students with disabilities. A concrete example of such a barrier is a presentation (slide-show) which cannot be read by a screen-reader, for example, people who are visually impaired. Barriers to this group can be fundamentally two types: physical, infrastructural barriers and non-material and methodological obstacles.

The dissertation aims to address issues related to the barriers of teaching and learning barriers, non-physical, non-infrastructural barriers (and their overcoming).

Barriers listed in the fourth group are the most difficult to overcome, even modern societies are not sufficiently socialised to accept people with disabilities. These barriers include various exclusion mechanisms, such as stigma, prejudice. These barriers are just as much present on the everyday basis in the area of access to higher education for students with disabilities as in education itself.

The dissertation does not aim to investigate these barriers in the field of higher education directly.

To make it clear what has been said before, the dissertation addresses in particular barriers in the second and third groups as described above. On the one hand, it outlines the nature of barriers, on the other hand, it looks at examples and approaches of how to overcome these barriers, with the support of relevant national and international literature review.

Objectives of the doctoral dissertation

Based on the identification of the barriers, the primary purpose of the dissertation is to present theoretical, practical approaches and methods which facilitate to overcome these barriers. Presentation of some European countries’ practices (that are significantly different from the national practices) contributes to discuss and learn about these less known or unknown approaches in the national academic debate.

It is important to emphasise the doctoral dissertation purposefully addresses issues, questions and new approaches and practices (applied practices in given countries) in order to make these new approaches known and discussed in a more comprehensive national academic context.

Thus, it does not say that the dissertation would suggest or encourage the widespread adoption of these solutions, methods, approaches, practices. It is the wider dissemination, professional discussion, consideration and analysis of all these.

Structure of the doctoral dissertation

The doctoral dissertation is divided into three main chapters. The first chapter investigates legislative barriers. This chapter addresses issues of medical/health, fitness to practice requirements which might have restrictions to access

to higher education for persons with disabilities. The chapter provides a brief overview of the international, European and national legislative environment of access to higher education for persons with disabilities.

This chapter discusses the Scottish practice, British and Irish professional debate. They question the common practice of the admission process of higher education in specific study fields (that approach is substantially different from other countries). The theoretical background of this new approach is discussed in this chapter.

The second chapter addresses issues about the teaching and learning environment in higher education for persons with disabilities. This chapter examines the so-called support provision (*Equitable Treating of Student with Disabilities*) which is a common procedure nowadays supporting people with disabilities in higher education. It identifies the barriers to teaching and learning, (teaching methodology and techniques). This chapter showcases an approach which is fundamentally different from the current practice in the national literature and practice.

This new approach is the so-called “*Inclusive Design for Teaching and Learning Environment*”, described as “*Universal Design for Teaching and Learning Environment*” in the North American literature. The chapter provides a detailed description of various educational design models and discusses the theoretical framework of the design of inclusive teaching and learning environment in comparison to “*Equitable Treating of Student with Disabilities*” support provision.

The third chapter describes the methodology and results of the empirical data collection. The goal of empirical data collection was to investigate the inclusiveness of teaching and learning environment in national higher education regarding students with disabilities.

The empirical data collection about the teaching and learning environment aimed to gather the opinions and experiences of:

- coordinators/officers supporting students with disabilities in higher education institutions,
- students with disabilities
- and
- lecturers.

The empirical data collection was based on questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. The teaching and learning environment has been assessed with all three of the main actors. It is important to emphasise that the empirical data collection is not based on a representative sample; therefore, it only showcases the problem, gives an overview of the situation.

First Thesis

In today's developed democracies, legal environments (with the support of high-level legislations) guarantee and regulate in detail access and participation in higher education regarding persons with disabilities. The current situation is a result of the long-term evolution of legal history. Mostly, after the Second World War, the process of evolution of legislation began to ensure that people with disabilities have equality of access, and equal treatment and prohibition of all forms of discrimination, providing full participation in society. During this period, a common practice has been established in the admission process for higher education institutions. In almost in all countries, in certain study fields of higher education, legislative environment requires medical/health, fitness to practice

assessment. As an example, in the case of a primary school teacher with a physical impairment, the question arises as to whether this person can secure the physical safety of the children entrusted to this person in all situation, and assist them in a given case?

Moreover, likewise, in the case of a teacher with dyslexia, the question arises as to how well the person can teach and write? The requirements of medical/health, fitness to practice were therefore based on rational considerations. It should be emphasised that in the given countries (but with almost complete certainty, in the absolute majority of the non-investigated states), the access of persons with disabilities to higher education are protected by legislation.

It seems at first, in the first approximation there are no barriers, problems, and no theoretical or practical questions were encountered about medical/health, fitness to practice requirement. These requirements have existed in almost every democratic country. In these countries, legislation with high-level laws has declared equal opportunities for people with disabilities and explicitly prohibited discrimination. Medical/health, fitness to practice examinations were required in specific fields of study (for example pedagogy) were introduced for the protection of health and safety of children/students and maintaining the quality of education.

What changes have substantially challenged the mainstream practice mentioned above?

There are three dominant factors which influenced the questioning of this practice. On the one hand, massification of higher education, the number of students has dramatically increased over the past period, and as a result, the number of students with disabilities has risen considerably in higher education institutions.

On the other hand, very recent changes have taken place in the democratisation of the societies, various discriminatory procedures and practices have been radically demolished, and in that correlation, individual freedoms have been strongly protected. In parallel with this change, approaches and concepts about disability were established including debates about whether various medical/health and fitness to practice requirements were discriminatory towards people with disabilities.

Thirdly, more professionals and scholars have claimed that these requirements do not provide the desired goal with the required medical/health and fitness to practice requirements. Many have voiced the view that these “fitness to practice requirements” are actually “unsuitable” to achieve the purpose for that they have been previously introduced.

All of these factors have contributed that preliminary analyses, examinations and extensive professional consultation about the relevance of fitness to practice exam have been carried out by the Scottish Executive Education Department (Scottish Executive, 2004, p. 1-3).

According to the results, fitness to practice was abolished, and they were moved to the competency of the employers to assess whether a person is suitable or unsuitable to work in a particular job. The elimination of fitness practice was justified that it can be considered as social barriers and discrimination in access to higher education. It has generated intense professional debates in the United Kingdom and Ireland.

The doctoral dissertation states that Scottish practice can be evaluated as a paradigm shift in providing access to higher education.

What is this paradigm shift? To what extent do the Scottish practice and the British and Irish debate follow a different path in this area? The Scottish practice considers fitness to practice as a social barrier to access to higher education in specific study fields which fundamentally differs from practices of other countries. Before the statutory changes have been introduced in Scotland, the dilemma was analysed with the support of professional debates and consultations about whether fitness to practice discriminates or not against persons with disabilities? In other words, based on discussions and social (professional) meetings, it can be concluded that, in the area of disability, access to higher education in Scotland is a human rights-based approach to disability. The Scottish approach is different from commonly used practices of other countries. Access to specific study fields of higher education is still fundamentally based on medical/health considerations (medical model of disability).

Related international literature (English language) has discussed Scottish practice in several papers (the dissertation provides a detailed overview of this), but it has not been explicitly stated that paradigm shift is here. Sin CH “*Medicalising Disability? Regulation and Practice on Fitness Assessment of Disabled Students and Professionals in Nursing, Social Work and Teacher Professions in Great Britain*” (Sin, 2009, p. 1523) states that the previous practice is highly medical, the author approached the problem, but did not even talk about the differences between the two models or the paradigm shift.

Although not mentioned in the Hungarian literature, analysis of the Scottish practice presented here, and the related British and Irish professional discussions, Hungarian authors and experts also perceived this issue. In the Hungarian professional literature Magdolna Soósné Dr. Faragó (Soósné Dr. Faragó, 2002, 43); Ágnes Lányiné Engelmayer (Lányiné, 2013, 6); Éva Gyarmathy and Júlia Czenner, (Czenner & Gyarmathy, 2014, 44), Matild Sági and Péter Nikitscher (Sági & Nikitscher, 2014, 86) have addressed fitness to practice related requirements but did not include theoretical questions related to paradigm shift in these publications.

The novelty is: to address the topic, to identify the barrier, to state the paradigm shift, and to incorporate the subject into the national academic debate. It is a novelty that concerns about Scottish practices are raised, and critical remarks are highlighted. Such observations are not found in the international or national literature.

Second Thesis

According to the international literature review support principles for people with disabilities, can be classified into three groups. These are the following:

1. *Equal treatment for people with disabilities (Same Support for everyone);*
2. *Equitable treatment (Different Support for People with Disabilities);*
3. *Removing Barriers (Creating an Inclusive Environment).*

Support provision under the first principle ignores people's differences and backgrounds, providing the same support for everyone.

The second principle takes into account the differences between individuals, such as barriers students with disabilities might face, and these barriers are attempted to overcome with a retrofitting approach. An essential feature of this practice is that the obstacles themselves are not removed.

The third principle does not strive to balance the differences but seeks to create conditions (*at the highest possible extent*) that eliminate barriers by making the environment accessible to everyone, taking into account the diversity of the human population.

The illustration shows the essence of the three principles of support.



The three main principles of support. Source: (Silcock, 2016, p. 1)

The doctoral dissertation identifies in detail and analyses the barriers of teaching and learning environment (teaching methodologies and techniques) that hinder the participation of students with disabilities. These barriers are no longer related to the built environment or the transport facilities the use of different vehicles or fitness to practice requirements, but are related to learning and the acquisition of knowledge.

Based on the analysis of the national legal environment it can be declared that supporting the participation of students with disabilities in education happens according to the so-called support provision: “*Different Support for Equal Access (Equitable Treatment of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education)*”. What is meant by the “*accommodations*”? Prospective students with disabilities or current students with disabilities may apply for different support provisions and exemptions (justified with a medical proof/certificate of their impairments, condition) facilitating admission process and the continuation of their studies. Government Regulation (87/2015 (IV)) of the 2011 CCIV. Higher Education Act defines details of the fulfilment of the academic obligations.

- Positive discrimination,
- support provision,
- partial
- and
- full exemption rules.

This practice is commonly applied in every country.

The literature review of Hungarian teaching and learning environment can be associated with Gábor Halász and his research associates, Higher Education and Innovation Research Group (Halász, 2012). Their expertise and work touch on this topic in the national context. However, ID, UDL, UID, UDI design methods and principles are not discussed. Within the Hungarian literature, this field of area can be related to the article of Éva Gyarmathy's “*Obstruction and Universal Design (Akadályozás és egyetemes tervezés)*” (Gyarmathy, 2014a) and the “*Technologies of equal opportunities -guidelines, methods and software (Esélyegyenlőségi technológiák –*

irányelvek, módszerek és szoftverek”) (Abonyi-Tóth, 2014). The latter examines issues related to accessibility-based information-technology solutions, through the use of information and communication technology, to develop a teaching and learning environment. It is worth mentioning the following that in Hungary Universal Design and Information and Research Center (ETIKK) is an expertise centre with a focus on the built environment and the accessible design of products.

Erika Jókai is a lecturer of the Department of Ergonomics and Psychology of the Budapest University of Technology and Economics. Her research field is universal design but does not address the design of teaching and learning environment.

The novelty of the second thesis is identifying barriers of the teaching and learning environment for people with disabilities and presentation of “*inclusive design for the teaching and learning environment*”, also known as “Universal Design for Teaching and Learning Environment”(Models) which have been unknown or less known in the national academic, professional environment.

Third Thesis

As mentioned above, the empirical data collection was aimed at exploring and measuring inclusiveness of teaching and learning environment of students with disabilities in the national higher education.

Methods/tools used in the empirical data collection

The empirical data collection was conducted using both quantitative and qualitative methods. The qualitative data collection complemented the quantitative data collection. It resulted in any information that was not readable from quantitative data. The tools/methods used in the empirical data collection were:

- semi-structured interviews (lecturers, students, coordinators and experts);
- self-completed questionnaires (among lecturers, students);
- secondary-analysis of statistical data;
- analysis of documents related to support the provision of students with disabilities

In the 2016/2017 academic year, a total of 287,018 students studied in higher education institutions in Hungary, information provided by the Ministry of Human Capacities (EMMI) and the Education Authority (OH). During the same timeframe, the number of registered students with disabilities was 2 437, which represented 0.849% of the total student population.

The primary concern for the choice of the higher education institutions involved in the empirical data collection was to choose those higher education institutions, where most of the students with disabilities are studying. Out of the sixty-five higher education institutions, twenty-three higher education institutions were invited to participate in the research. Out of the officially contacted twenty-three higher education institutions, thirteen coordinators /officers supporting students with disabilities of higher education institutions accepted the participation in the interview.

It can be declared that 55% of students are studying in the participating higher education institutions while the same proportion of students with disabilities is 65%. It gives an illustration of the situation in Hungary, as the dominant portion of the student population is studying in these higher education institutions.

List of thematic interview questions with coordinators supporting students with disabilities

Based on a preliminary analysis of the various roles and responsibilities of coordinators, semi-structured interviews were conducted with them in the following thematic areas:

- Legislation regarding supporting students with disabilities
- Equal opportunity strategies and action plans;
- Organizational structures of support provided for students with disabilities;
- Visibility and impact of coordinators' work;
- Professional background of disability coordinators;
- Job monitoring of disability coordinators;
- Training provision for disability coordinators;
- Training provision for lecturer and relevant personnel;
- Professional collaborations and grants;
- Financial resources supporting students with disabilities;
- Provision of support services for students with disabilities;
- Projects;

Participant Higher education institutions

Officers of Education Authority's Higher Education Information System (FIR) provided information about academic fields of students with disabilities. These statistical data were the basis for selecting the target group. The distribution of students with disabilities by higher education institutions is provided in Table 9. The next step in choosing the target groups was to receive official permission (authorisation) for the conduction of the research. There is no need for an explanation for approval, but it is important to highlight that specific data protection and privacy regulations apply to students with disabilities. I requested permission from the higher education institutions (Rector's licenses). Authorisation processes took place in co-operation with the institutional disability coordinators.

Ten higher education institutions were invited to participate in the research. These were following institutions: Eötvös Loránd University, the University of Debrecen, the University of Pécs, the University of Szeged, the Budapest University of Technology and Economics, Széchenyi István University (Győr), Semmelweis University, Eszterházy Károly University, the University of Miskolc and the Sopron University. Of the ten higher education institutions, four institutions: Eötvös Loránd University, the University of Debrecen, University of Pécs, Semmelweis University, the Eszterházy Károly University provided permission (Rector's permission) for the conduction of the research.

Groups of research questions

The questionnaires are available in the "Appendix". Table 6 lists the main topic groups of questions in the questionnaires.

Questionnaire for students

- socio-demographic questions
- About studies
- About access to higher education
- Analysis of teaching and learning environment Analysis of teaching and learning environment (course design, the design of course atmosphere, teaching materials and tools, forms of teaching and supporting learning, teaching methods, shapes and types of assessment)
- About support provision for students with disabilities
- Disclosure of disability & use of support services

Interviews with students

- Career (studies) and motivation
- Experiences of admission procedures
- Experiences of teaching and learning environment (course design, course atmosphere, knowledge transition, applied teaching and learning)
- Support provision for learning (by lecturers, coordinators and other personnel)
- Disclosure of disability, requesting support

Questionnaire for lecturers

- socio-demographic questions
- Questions about teaching
- Analysis of teaching and learning environment (course design, the design of course atmosphere, teaching materials and tools, forms of teaching and supporting learning, teaching methods, shapes and types of assessment)
- About support provision for students with disabilities
- Opinions and experiences of helping students with disabilities and provision of accommodations

Interviews with lecturers

- Career
- Experiences of teaching and learning environment (course design, course atmosphere, knowledge transition, applied teaching and learning)
- Support provision, accommodations of access needs
- Opinions and experiences of supporting students with disabilities and provision of accommodations

Results

In the empirical data collection, in total thirteen disability coordinators, fifteen teachers and thirteen students and eleven experts were interviewed. Among students with disabilities, eighty-seven completed questionnaires, thirty-one questionnaires returned from lecturers. Opinions and experiences of a total of one hundred and seventy people have been recorded in some way in this area (as students, lecturers, or disability coordinators and experts). Taking into account that a total of 914 registered students with disabilities study in the participating five higher education institutions, the empirical data collection was conducted as a one-person' work, with a personal interview with Disability Coordinators (including Disability Coordinators outside of the Budapest capital area). Disability coordinators sent questionnaires according to the data protection regulations.

In the national higher education institutions, the proportion of registered students with disabilities is 0.8% of the student population. By comparison, in the United Kingdom and Ireland and Western Europe, this ratio is around 12% (HESA, 2018) (AHEAD, 2016).

Due to the low number of students with disabilities and their proportion within the total student population, in Hungary, access and participation in higher education for students with disabilities are considerably is a “less priority/pressuring issue” compared to the Western European countries where proportion of students with disabilities more than ten times higher in higher education. This situation explains why the development of inclusive teaching and learning environments in national higher education does not appear to be as a pressuring/burning problem, or task.

Collection and design of the set of questions used in the empirical data collection based on a particular system of criteria, “Inclusive Teaching Strategy Inventory” (Lombardi, 2012) and the UDL Guidelines (CAST, 2018) and, on the other hand, taking into account the national practice, circumstances and a number of issues including accommodations of access needs.

Findings show that in the Hungarian higher education institutions the Equitable treatment (Different Support for People with Disabilities) works successfully and effectively, which is the result of devoted work of the disability coordinators. As a general experience, it can be concluded that making education more accessible (inclusive) requires considerable additional work and time, but recognition of these does not always happen. The current system does not reward this other work of lecturers.

Interviews with lecturers and students revealed that in the national system if only sporadically, there were also methods, teaching techniques, and initiatives which were already in line with the principles of universal design (ID, UDL, etc.). It is also important to emphasise that lecturers, disability coordinators and as well as students have been interested in creating an inclusive teaching and learning environment. Some have suggested receiving more information about that ID, UDL, UID, etc. principles, and methods. As a follow-up to the doctoral dissertation, it is planned to compile such a guide. Expertise and experience of disability coordinators can serve as a basis for the creation of an inclusive teaching and learning environment.

It is considered novelty in the empirical data collection the collection and design of questions in the questionnaires, and interviews using the basis of inclusive design (ID, UDL, etc.) and on the other hand, findings give information about the current state of art of higher education in regards of design of inclusive teaching and learning environment. Such kind of data collection has not been done so far.

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